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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 SANTIAGO 000228

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: BACHELET'S TRIP TO CUBA: TOP OFFICIALS PUT ON A  
POSITIVE SPIN, HIGHLIGHT CUBAN REACTION TO OBAMA  
(C-AL9-00405)

REF: SANTIAGO 157

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Classified By: Political Officer Jennifer Spande for reason 1.4 (b)

¶1. (C) Summary: Two key foreign policy makers--presidential advisor Marcos Robledo and the MFA's #3 ranked official, Juan Pablo Lira--maintain that President Bachelet's February trip to Cuba was very successful, a contrast to the negative press coverage it received. Bachelet raised human rights issues privately with Cuban leaders. Raul Castro was positive about the new administration and eager to know how a change in U.S. policy could unfold. Cubans have high expectations of the Obama administration. Lira was particularly struck by how much Cuba had changed for the better since he last visited the island in 1992. End Summary.

¶2. (U) Visiting OAS Permanent Representative and Summit of the Americas Coordinator Ambassador Hector Morales, accompanied by the Ambassador and emboffs, met with Robledo, Lira, and other Chilean officials on March 4. Septel will report on insight into Chile's priorities for the Summit of the Americas, the principal focus of these meetings.

Bachelet's Cuba Trip Successful, Human Rights Raised  
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¶3. (C) Presidential advisor Marcos Robledo described President Bachelet's February 10-13 trip to Cuba as "positive, a very good visit" and said he was very surprised by the negative coverage it had received in the Chilean press. MFA Director General Juan Pablo Lira echoed Robledo's comments in a separate conversation. He noted, "There were many positive things that happened that weren't in the newspapers," highlighting the large number of technical and cooperative agreements signed and productive meetings.

¶4. (C) Both Robledo and Lira said that Bachelet had been frank in her discussions with Cuban leaders, bringing up human rights and other sensitive topics. Robledo said that five days before the President's arrival in Havana, the Chileans alerted the Cubans that they would not hold back on the human rights issue. Robledo also highlighted the February 5 speech of Ambassador Carlos Portales at the Cuba Universal Periodic Review in Geneva as an example of Chile's willingness to talk tough with Cuba. After praising Cuba's signing of key human rights declarations, Portales called for Cuba to live up to its commitments by promoting judicial independence; protection for human rights defenders and political dissidents; and guarantees of freedom of expression and of movement inside and outside Cuba. He said the speech was well-received by Amnesty International and Human Rights

Watch. Among the Latinos, only Chile and Mexico had been willing to speak up.

15. (C) The meeting between Raul Castro and Bachelet was cordial, Robledo said, and the two leaders discovered that they had much in common. Bachelet raised Cuba's entry into the Rio Group as an important gesture, but one that raised obligations on Cuba's part. Raul Castro was very positive about the Obama administration and expressed interest in any "antecedentes" or historical precedents that could hint at how a possible change in U.S. policy towards the island nation might unfold. Bachelet encouraged Raul to "exploit the U.S. opening" by taking some positive steps to reach out. Raul appeared to value this advice. Bachelet's visit finished very well, he said, with the Cuban President being extraordinarily gracious in escorting his Chilean peer to her plane. (Note: Neither Robledo nor Lira commented on the President's meeting with Fidel Castro, which is a sore spot for Concertacion leaders due to Fidel's subsequent harsh comments. See reftel. End Note.)

#### Reading Cuba's Tea Leaves

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16. (C) Robledo and Lira were both encouraged by Cuba's recent entry into the Rio Group; Robledo said that Cuba needed more contact with other countries. This is an interesting moment for Cuba, Robledo noted, saying that the cabinet shuffle must have been planned and that Raul was attempting to surround himself with the old guard in order to "recuperate" his legitimacy. The signals coming out of Cuba are contradictory, he admitted, but he believes that they are positive overall. Robledo added that Cuban leadership should take advantage of the "new environment" in the U.S., and Lira commented that the Cuban people have very high expectations of President Obama.

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17. (C) Lira and MFA Multilateral Affairs Director Juan Eduardo Eguiguren shared their own analysis of some of the moves in Cuba's cabinet shuffle. Lira, who accompanied the President on her trip, said that he had been surprised when Cuban Vice President of the Council of State Carlos Lage, who has been one of Chile's closest official contacts in Cuba with long standing ties to the Chilean PPD party, was not present for any of Bachelet's meetings. Lage's absence became clear when he was sacked. However, Lira said he was perplexed that Foreign Minister Felipe Perez Roque, who had been active during the trip, was also replaced. Eguiguren added that he had worked in the UN with Cuba's new Foreign Minister, Bruno Rodriguez. Rodriguez would toe the party line, especially in public fora, but after giving the official position was a receptive and non-dogmatic listener.

18. (C) Ambassador Hector Morales, the U.S. Permanent Representative to the OAS, told Robledo the U.S. wants Cuba to integrate itself into the hemispheric community in line with the democratic principles and values the rest of the hemisphere accepts. Ambassador Morales added that some countries in the hemisphere appeared to be trying to force the issue even though Cuba was not very interested in OAS membership. Moreover the question really is what is Cuba prepared to do, and to note that President Obama had already made a gesture towards Cuba during his presidential campaign by signaling his willingness to relax restrictions on travel and remittances, Ambassador Morales highlighted.

#### Cuba Then and Now

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19. (C) Lira, the MFA's Undersecretary for Political Affairs equivalent, went on at some length describing the dramatic changes he had seen in Cuba during this visit as opposed to his only other trip to the island, 17 years ago. During his first visit in 1992, much of Havana had no water,

electricity, or transportation. He left the island "brutally depressed" and "freaked out." Now, Havana has completely changed for the better. There is public transportation, beautification in the city center, and stores are open. There is poverty, but no widespread police presence and he felt comfortable walking extensively around the city on his own.

¶10. (C) The huge influx of tourism has caused changes as well, Lira explained. Cubans engaged in tourism can legally hold Cuban Convertible Pesos (CUC), which are helping to create a parallel economy whose participants have access to modern technology like cell phones and TV. Cubans now have somewhat better access to information: hotels broadcast international news networks that local residents working in the hotels overhear, some homes have satellite dishes, and tourist sector entrepreneurs trade stories and perspectives with travelers.

¶11. (C) Lira noted that there is only a small Chilean community in Cuba, consisting mainly of Chileans who have married Cubans. Chile is particularly interested in learning from Cuba's neurosurgery and rehabilitation expertise, which he described as very advanced care for a very low price.

Comment

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¶12. (C) Lira and Robledo, both key figures within Chile's foreign policy establishment, are clearly frustrated by the negative public and press reaction to a presidential trip to Cuba that they feel was largely successful. While gushing about progress in Havana, the agreements signed and cooperation plans made, the two advisors were also quick to assert that Chile had taken a stand--both in Havana and at the UN--in favor of greater freedoms and human rights in Cuba. End Comment.  
SIMONS